

Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire
Board of Selectmen
Meeting – April 17, 2020
Town Hall, 620 Old Homestead Highway and remotely using Zoom.
Swanzey, NH

ZOOM MEETING during Health Emergency

Town Administrator Michael Branley hosted a ZOOM online conference call at 2:00 pm at Town Hall due to the public health emergency. Emergency Meeting pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04, Section 8 and Emergency Order #12, Section 3.

Present were Selectmen W. William Hutwelker, Sylvester Karasinski and Kenneth P. Colby, Jr. Also present was Town Administrator Michael Branley and Recording Secretary Beverly Bernard.

PUBLIC ACCESS

Notice was given to the public to participate remotely over Zoom by going to www.zoom.us or using the Zoom App on a cell phone, or a landline calling 1 929 205 6099 and entering Meeting ID 235 370 4380 #. The notice also provides a phone number: 352-7411 ext. 107 to call should a member of the public be unable to access the meeting.

OTHERS PRESENT

Phil Suter, President of the Greater Keene (NH) Chamber of Commerce, Director of Planning & Economic Development Matthew Bachler, Chair of the Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC) Steve Bittel, EDAC members Greg Johnson and Lynn Rust, Attorney Barry Faulkner, State Senator Jay Kahn, and many others.

COVID-19 UPDATE

Branley reported the latest virus figures: 1211 cases, 34 deaths, and 455 recovered. Cheshire has 26 cases. News is that schools will continue with remote learning for the rest of the school year.

Suter said it has been busy month. He said many businesses have come up with ways to survive, but now heading into a period of May, June, and July and it is clear things won't return to normal right away. The end will only come when there is a vaccine that can be distributed widely and that is estimated at 18 months away. He said re-opening businesses will be up to each business and towns. He said the Chamber is meeting weekly with the State Bureau of Economic Affairs. In the last 24 hours some programs have been suspended until further funding can be obtained. He noted the Chamber has been shut out of the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) program. Looking at ways to continue moving ahead. A weekly call is co-hosted by Mayor Hansel of the City of Keene and Suter in which businesses are invited to share information from all over the area.

Kahn asked if there is a drop off in workforce with major employers. Suter said some of the workforce challenges are the same for some businesses like Smith Medical. Current unemployment rate is 15-20%. Suter said there will be a workforce challenge and realignment. There will be some who do not have jobs to go back to. He said they are hoping as a Chamber to play a role in that effort.

Faulkner said most people losing jobs are in hospitality and restaurants. Suter noted (Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing (RCAM) is working on a group effort with Keene State College to try to get training to folks at the right time. There will be a misalignment between skills and available jobs, which will require community colleges and others to step up and provide training.

Bittel asked about specific Swanzey businesses and what feedback from small businesses as opposed to larger employers. Suter said Chamber staff member is a West Swanzey resident and she has provided anecdotal evidence. Businesses have been spending time finding out what resources are available to get help with funding. He said the Chamber has resources online. He said some businesses will not re-open again or at least right away. Suter said he feels the Governor's executive order will probably be extended. One issue to be faced is knowing how many people will actually show up once a business is open again. There are a lot of questions about the behavior of people once the business is open. Problem is no testing for virus in place nor antibody testing. Absent those things, people do not have confidence to be out and about. He noted a business with 30 employees would not want all 30 to appear if opened, what to do without testing. Testing is extremely important part of encouraging people to gather again. Suter said safe harbor provision is needed for employers to protect from litigation since concerns will be raised if told to come to work, but no testing ready.

Bittel said he hopes that someone is being innovative about business. More shifts could be done. After a while, shutting down the economy is not sustainable. Suter said no-one is likely to be doing business in the same way as done in the past. Some businesses are innovative with curbside pickup or delivery. Some businesses are operating remotely. There is a lot of innovation going on. They are trying to capture best practices. The restaurant community and has been working together as opposed to when they used to be competitive. Lucca's has spent a lot of time showing others how to do curbside pickup. Suter said any ideas would be welcome.

Branley asked about observations as to what smaller towns like Swanzey should be doing. While many decisions are being made at Federal and State level, maybe there is something we should be doing or should not be doing. Suter said try to collect information from businesses about their experiences. He said they are feeding back to the Federal government with this information. Second thing is germane to towns, NH share of recovery funding is \$1.25 billion. That is a lot of money for a small state. Question is how will the funds be distributed? Suter said he thinks it will be distributed before the end of the calendar year. He said the purpose of those funds is not to make up for lost revenue. The purpose as best understood is that they are forward looking so that a town like Swanzey should have shovel-ready projects once the funds are in place. It will be helpful in determining where the money goes – GOFERR is name of program. Stakeholder advisory board for that program. Suter said the first nine people appointed were not very business-like and devoid of representation for our part of the State. Mayor Hansel is drafting a letter to the Governor stating that one of the people to be appointed should be from the Monadnock region. He said the Mayor has a list of four or five people right now he could propose and if Swanzey has a suggestion for someone, let Suter know. Suter said that person will need a thick skin because he/she will be a target. Suter said the area needs someone to advocate for our part of the State, in order to get a fair share of program funds. Suter said the program will be put into place quickly – there will be a scramble for the money.

Kahn said he wrote to a member of that advisory board and repeated the message of Mayor Hansel. Kahn said it needs to be someone from Cheshire County and please suggest someone if you have one. Kahn said the first money decisions will not be very quick and it shouldn't be. It will have to cover a lot of needs. There isn't guidance from the Federal Department of the Treasury at this point.

Suter said Kahn is part of joint fiscal committee (approximately ten State legislators) and they have a key role in this. They have to accept the money and influence on what happens to the funds. Kahn said he is sitting in on the GOFERR meetings. They are the interface between the Governor and the Legislature. But the role adds more layers to action.

Suter said he is interested in hearing anecdotes about business in Swanzey. Branley said we could email them to Suter. Branley said he will work on that. Suter said the Chamber is working on a survey for businesses in the Monadnock region and hope to collect data.

Bittel said he has heard grouching about being non-essential business. He asked Suter to put into the Chamber survey a question to non-essential businesses about whether they can be released from not being able to open business if they can operate safely. Suter said the list of essential business is a living document and perhaps will be revised list of essential versus non-essential eventually.

Bachler said he did work with the Ashuelot River Campground folks and did help the owner contact the State – there is an online form to submit to be considered an essential business or for an exemption. He can direct folks to that site. Branley said there is a concern about campgrounds if having folks from other states. Suter said golf courses could be done while practicing physical distancing. But if one state opens up and other states do not, you would get folks from other states coming into NH to use them.

Branley noted a need for a regional solution for folks who do not have internet access. He said libraries have been used for internet access and potentially a solution could be regional. Suter said they are open to new ideas. Suter said one of the issues being exposed is broadband access with need to work from home. Improved cell coverage and broadband connectivity should be pushed for.

Kahn said on the GOFERR call, the Municipal Association was on call and they reported on survey results; every town needs to complete the survey and will be a good voice for towns. As for campgrounds, executive order #31 opens campgrounds with certain guidelines. He added the idea of libraries as a source of internet access, he will pass it along to see what reaction will be. He said it is important for ideas to come from a variety of directions.

Colby said according to Channel 9 campgrounds are open, which is upsetting some folks because people are coming in from other states. They think they are an essential business. He thanked Suter for being on the call and asked for further comments.

Suter said he is happy to do it and please ask him to join a call again in a couple of weeks.

Meeting over at 2:46 pm

Respectfully Submitted,



Beverly Bernard, Recording Secretary
Approved on April 22, 2020